Madness at the Heart of Early weird fiction: Exploring the Abyss of the Mind through Complex Characterization in Seminal 19th century Texts

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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MANAV RACHNA UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

More than being a purely biomedical condition, madness has also been used as a concept in various works across sociocultural, historical and literary concepts for decades – emerging as a tool that, for example, serves as a cover-up for anxieties, a means for exploitation and victimization and a justification for marginalization which is discriminatory. Likewise, in literature, madness is often seen to be a recurring trope used as a thematic device. This research examines the use of madness across multiple sociocultural contexts, specifically as a tool for evoking fear. The 19th century Gothic genre, in particular, repeatedly uses madness to develop horror through the disturbed actions and thoughts of its characters. In simple words, madness can be described as behaviors that differ from the usually socially accepted norms, hence producing a fear of the unknown or uncontrollable. In Victorian Britain, the rise of Gothic literature came along with the frequent use of madness as a point of narration. This study explores the specific nature of the horror instigated by madness in three seminal texts of the period and proposes that these texts can be seen as early examples of the 20th century Weird Fiction where distorted thoughts and actions lead to possible disasters. Through close textual analysis, the research examines the portrayal of varying manifestations of madness, such as the obsessive scientific ambition in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, psychotic symptoms as a result of oppression in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and repressed sexual desires leading to terrifying physical violence in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. These texts are analyzed through their complex characterizations while being placed within their broader sociocultural and historical contexts. This opens up the scope to study the spectrum of madness, whether it's actually a condition or a construct, to establish a common thread that leads to Weird fiction genre of the following century, offering a cautionary message about where the world is headed. The present research engages in establish these texts as a hypothetical genre, Proto-weird fiction, where horror evoked through madness ranging from scientific to cosmic horror.

Keywords: Gothic, Horror, Madness, Weird Fiction, 19th century

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1. Introduction

"There is just so much hurt, disappointment, and oppression one can take... The line between reason and madness grows thinner."

- Rosa Parks

Following Rosa Parks' interpretation, the definitive meaning of 'madness' has often appeared as a dynamic and versatile element in human history. At times, it is anchored in medical and psychological findings, and at other times, it is a tool to cover up something that might disrupt the status quo. It is common in societies to pass off any behaviour that does not conform to socially acceptable norms as 'madness'. Therein comes the scope for studying the effect of the alleged symptom or disorder to fathom its deep-rootedness in collective belief systems. The question that naturally follows is: Does madness impact society, or does society induce madness?

As observed across historical timelines, the idea of 'madness' encompasses a broad spectrum of behavioural, psychological, interpersonal and social factors. Thereby, this complex psychoanalytical concept becomes a diluted and generalized idea of 'madness, defining all that is beyond our comprehension.' These interpretations are often far beyond the psychoanalytic theories, bordering on assumptions. Tracing back in time, one can see how 'madness' was treated more as an act of a supernatural spirit than a psychological complexity. As observed by John Crane and Jette Hannibal, in the Neolithic Era, madness was treated through lobotomy (drilling a hole in the skull of the 'mad' person) to ward off the evil spirit. This also indicates how society often used 'madness' as a common symptom to blame anything that did not fit a defined pattern, and easily attached a negative connotation to it. It is only in modern times that advances in psychological studies have made the study of madness more diagnosis-based in method and biomedical in nature, thereby calling for an in-depth analysis of how madness was often used as a commonly called-for accusation. (Crane & Hannibal, 2012).

The present study steps away from the etiological framework of this concept and focuses more on characterization of selected example to study them in the context of the socio-cultural landscape of the 19th century. It aims to identify certain traits in them that

automatically invited the labelling of 'mad' that was much beyond biomedical symptoms. 'Madness' in this study is more of an external manifestation of the internal turmoil of these characters. It is that 'breaking point' of the ordinary human experience, and thereby destabilize status quo. The natural byproduct of this upheaval is the emotion of fear, a social warning against overstepping cultural boundaries. In these texts, madness appears in many forms: ranging from suppressed psychological symptoms to extreme acts of physical violence. As a recurring trope in 19th century Gothic fiction, madness functions as a powerful source of terror. This study extends that understanding to 20th century Weird Fiction where present-day practices are exaggerated to reveal hidden and unsettling threats.

For this reason, the selected texts are treated as a part of a hybrid literary body, hypothetically established as 'Proto-weird Fiction'. Returning to the relationship between madness as a symptom in individuals and society, the study draws connections between the Gothic and Weird Fiction genres by examining madness as a mask for deeper social issues and anxieties and structural gaps of their time. Throughout this research, madness is examined in its various forms – from psychotic disturbances to expressions of cosmic horror – within this proto-weird corpus. The analysis examines both the causes of madness-induced fear (the "why") and the ways in which it appears (the "what"). Through this approach, the study emphasizes the complexity of the human mind and its capacity to generate unfamiliar thoughts and actions that produce horror. Ambition, obsession, inner psychosis, and dark desires emerge as central forces shaping these narratives within their specific historical contexts.

2. Review of Literature

English Literature, across ages, has witness varied means of Madness, employed primarily at the end to eliminate the threat in anything unfamiliar, or the 'other' and thereby restore the already established status quo. The study of the primary texts present Ranging from psychological to social and physical forms, they have occupied prominent places in literary development across ages. On the premises of considering some seminal Gothic works as the precursor of early weird fiction, the selection of texts covers a spectrum of horror, from a more physical to a cosmic form through the study of three primary texts -

i) The protagonist, Victor, in ***Frankenstein*** (Shelley, 1996), is obsessed with his scientific quest of creating life. He assumes the role of a scientific over-achiever that brings him a God-like status. His aspirations of subverting the natural order makes him a Promethean figure by placing scientific rationality and Romantic subjectivity in direct opposition to each other and mirrors the inherent conflict in the Victorian society. 'Madness' in this particular context is that 'unnatural' ambition that plays a cautionary around scientific advancement of the time. A parallel streak of madness is also developed through the 'creature,' who seeks paternal affection the absence of that comes as the nemesis for this 'insolence'. This spectrum of 'madness,' and its consequences leads to horror in the readers' mind where they experience the unexpected and also get to see what that leads to.

ii) ***Wuthering Heights*** (Brontë, 1995) presents a more psychic and emotional depiction of madness. Catherine and Heathcliff are connected through their wild passion and thereby, directly challenge the Victorian societal conventions. The orphan Heathcliff and Cathy, belonging to the gentry are naturally attracted through emotions that are very raw in nature. While the natural culmination of a romantic interest in the Victorian society would lead to marriage, Cathy and Heathcliff are denied this stamp of societal approval, as that would deny the established social class structure. As expected of Cathy, she decides to maintain status quo by choosing Linton over Heathcliff. Her periodic frenzies represent madness that implies repressed desire and unresolved trauma. This social denial brings a feeling of impending doom over Wuthering Heights that leads to a feeling of unease and establishes the repercussions of unrequited love. It is a classic testament of social oppression and its effect on the human mind that ultimately affects the energy field.

iii) In ***Dracula*** (Stoker, 1993), presents madness in the form of supernatural horror. Apart from violence that is graphic, it's also the inevitability of fate that presents an experience of horror for the readers. It engages the audience to think and shudder at the thought of the consequences of Lucy's aggressive and dark sexual desire. Lucy is the symbolic representation of the 'new woman,' of the Victorian fin-de-siècle, who

acknowledged their feelings and desires and even talked about them. The novel comes with a symbolic representation of the societal norms encountering death where vampire life is presented as a limbo between life and death. Van Helsing chasing Lucy in her vampire state from London to Transylvania is symbolic of driving away the 'other' to restore order in Victorian Britain (Dohss, 2020). As observed by Katherine L. Spencer, the repressed sexuality in the novel is a catalyst of fear that becomes more pervasive in the context of the 'purity crusade' Britain was engaged in at that point (Spencer, 1992). *Dracula* offers nuanced portrayals of mental fragmentation by showcasing Lucy's sexual advancement as an 'unnatural' desire. It captures how madness in 19th-century fiction becomes a metaphor that explored the human mind and desires and made a natural progression towards modern psychological horror.

The present research focuses on Gothic as a genre that associates with internal disorder, intentional disruption of social norms and rationality. The study of secondary resources in this research engages with exploration of context and the nuanced presentation of madness. According to Michael Foucault, madness is a phenomenon that has evolved with the changing landscape of civilization in terms of culture, laws, politics, and philosophy. He traces how in the history of civilization, people with high ambition or passion, who did not conform to the societal norms have been marginalized as 'mad'. His study establishes how societies have passed off all possible social threats as symptoms of madness to cover up insecurities. The labelling of 'madness' has served as an easy solution for removing the threats by categorizing them in the 'other' category (Foucault, 1961). As widely portrayed in the Gothic genre, the characters often border on insanity, signifying a deep fear of losing control – socially, morally, and cognitively and induce fear in their audience through the consequences of their thoughts and action.

Anne K. Mellor's interpretation of *Frankenstein* defines Victor's experimentation as borderline 'unethical genetic modification,' drawing a parallel with stem cell processing in plant-based meat products and other foods and identifies them as 'Frankenfoods' (Mellor, 2012). This records the conflict around science and nature coming at a loggerhead and modifying the usual order of things through monstrous results, as reflected widely in the weird

Fictions of the 20th century. The trajectory of ambition lands Victor in a spiral of overbearing feeling of guilt, while the creature seeks revenge for this paternal betrayal. Both lead to psychological instability, where it becomes a dual tragedy of both the creator and the creation, showing how science that defies nature leads to a catastrophic end.

Gilbert and Gubar explore 'psychic gothic' undercurrents in *Wuthering Heights*, through a close analysis of the dynamics between Catherine and Heathcliff in the backdrop of Victorian anxiety. While their love transcends social definitions, it also blurs the line between passion and pathological attachment. To restore social equilibrium it requires to settle for something more settled, in the form of Cathy's wedlock to Edgar Linton. The trauma of the forced separation and a violent resistance to patriarchal constraints are explored in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Catherine's mad episodes symbolize her wild spirit rebelling to break free. Her tearing up the pillow and 'liberating' the feathers helps her metaphorically feel liberated in making 'a whole bird' of the feathers (Gilbert & Gubar, 2007). Readers are often terrified by this constant conflict between passion and order, with the ultimate restoration of order through oppression. It raises questions about psychological stability and the expression of aggression, as modern diagnoses of PTSD or manic depression.

Liah Greenfeld presents another view on the representation of madness in literary texts, "The first such connection to strike me was the role schizophrenic mental disease played in shaping modern literature. … From the eighteenth century onwards, it was not simply the work of people admittedly suffering from manic depression or full-blown schizophrenia but has been both saturated with peculiar-to-schizophrenics' abnormalities of thought and language – that is, uncontrolled linguistic creativity characteristic of schizophrenia, and represented a characteristic of such sufferers turning to language for help, a desperate, though unconscious, attempt to name and thus make sense of their horrifying experience" (Greenfeld, 2013). It blends biomedical and psychoanalytic factors and how they came together in literary narratives of the time.

Stephen D. Arata in his essay *The Occidental Tourist* (Arata, 1990) links madness to imperial anxieties and the concept of the 'Other'. As he states, "The decay of British global

influence, the loss of overseas markets for British goods, the economic and political rise of Germany and the United States, the increasing unrest in British colonies and possessions, the growing domestic uneasiness over the morality of imperialism - all combined to erode Victorian confidence in the inevitability of British progress and hegemony" (Arata, 1990). An analytical reading of this essay also calls for a parallel study of orientalism and its connection to imperialism to examine how the concept of the 'occidental' (catering to the Western world) was forming in the minds of Victorian scholarship.

Further to this, Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady* (Showalter, 1985), analyzes how 19th-century narratives often medicalized female behavior, turning women's emotions into pathologized conditions. In 19th century literature, the idea of the female mind was often shaped through narratives of madness and hysteria to neutralize perceived threats. This framework forcefully constructed and medicalized women's behavior, shaping the interpretation of female characters such as Lucy in *Dracula* and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*. Over time, this pattern gave rise to the figure of the "hysterical woman," whose supposed monstrosity justified confinement and control.

Modern critics have revisited this trope to raise an important question: is the darkness of the human mind always an internal condition, or is it imposed from the outside? In Myths of Power, Terry Eagleton describes these narratives as forms of "high drama" rooted in the tension between the "passionate and the pettish" (Eagleton, 1988). Using Wuthering Heights as a key example, this study makes use of Catherine's inner conflict, which moves from biological and neurotic madness toward a deeper psychic longing that haunts both her and the novel's setting. Catherine's madness stems from her struggle with her inner child - who had fallen in love with Heathcliff – while her outward identity conforms to rigid Victorian gender roles and social duty. This duality supports Katherine Reeve's reading of Wuthering Heights as a work with "one foot in the grave," where a sense of inevitability and foreboding emerges as soon as the romantic narrative begins to take shape (Reeve, 2018).

Throughout this study, cultural anxiety and psychological complexity merge, revealing madness as a kind of visible manifestation of deeper social crises. In Dracula, this crisis centers on sexual appropriateness, especially concerning Victorian women. Lucy Westenra must be

eliminated because her suppressed sexual desires threaten social stability. Her perceived looseness makes her both alluring and dangerous, leading to her transformation into a "living-dead" figure who endangers mankind. By reversing her expected role, Lucy is then recast as a sexual aggressor who must be corrected through reason, science, and medical authority, represented by Van Helsing and his allies (Monsters & Madness: Secret Lives in Victorian Literature, 2023).

As the century comes to an end, Lucy's psychological instability becomes a way for society to reassert control over a world marked by rapid political, economic, and cultural change. This instability foreshadows the humanitarian concerns that are later explored by Weird Fiction. The MOOC The Popular Gothic likewise shows how Gothic narratives reflect the inner insecurities of Victorian society, revealing how madness often served as a literary mask for deeper social fears. Whether shaped by the rise of scientific inquiry that challenged traditional beliefs, colonial expansion and the fear of the "other," or the emergence of the "New Woman," the 19th century was a period of transition and identity crisis (Dohss, 2020). By examining texts from the early 19th century to the Victorian fin de siècle, this study traces the changing anxieties of the age through different representations of what was considered "not normal." This study will build on these critical insights to explore how these "mad" characters act as precursors to weird fiction, embodying psychological and existential fears that would later be developed in the 20th century through the rise of Weird fiction.

On the other hand, "Victorian Literature: An Interdisciplinary Introduction" is a MOOC designed to present the different phases of the Victorian society and its literature through an in-depth study of how multiple factors came into defining the literature of the time. It shows how these factors were all interconnected and led to an age of objective rationalism and scientific thinking. At the same time, it presents a bridge to the modern world as would emerge soon after by defining the anxieties of the time (Mahapatra, 2018)

Besides the stated ones, the present research engages with a range of critical literary works with a focus on the horror that this madness induces and how it connects to the fear of unknown and the uncontrollable. In Gothic fiction, this fear is often a reflection of insecurity and anxiety and in Weird fiction, this horror is a mirror of a warning, capturing an internal disorder. H.P. Lovecraft, in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Lovecraft, 1973), asserts that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest

kind of fear is fear of the unknown." This concept is connected to 19th-century texts, where madness is not merely personal but almost cosmic and unknowable. Recent scholars also examine how gender and social positioning influence the portrayal of madness. His analysis helps identify how *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Dracula* act as proto-weird fiction that capture a transition of from fear of unknown to an uncertain future.

3. Rationale of the Study

The present doctoral study examines how madness becomes an integral part of the 19th century Gothic Fiction and quietly spills on to the 20th century literary mindset too, by engaging with complex characters who thought and acted outside 'accepted and established norms' as response to social anxieties and insecurities. The depiction and consequences of this madness reveal dark abyss of scientific, philosophical, and social change that led to the degeneration of self-integrity. To see the trajectory of this trope, the present research engages with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as representative texts spanning the whole century.

The study of 'madness' in these texts has been conceptualized as a bridge that connects insecurities of two consecutive centuries through a common thread of 'madness'. By placing a biomedical condition in a socio-historical framework, the present study emphasizes psychoanalytic approaches that evoke horror through the idea of the 'unknown' in the selected texts

4. Problem Statement

The study involves a close reading of *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Dracula*, for a thematic and theoretical investigation of how madness represents the insecurities and anxieties of the time – expressed through varied manifestations. The study opens up a scope for interdisciplinary exploration by examining psychoanalytic theories and placing them in the Victorian historical and economic context to understand how 'madness' often defies biomedical causes alone and become a means of social marginalization through narrative and symbolic representation in the 19th century Gothic fiction. On one hand, the literary analysis

and exploration of the primary texts are placed in a socio-historical context to capture the cultural fears of the time – scientific, moral, social and so on to study the 'fear factors' in the texts. On the other hand, it will also examine the nature of horror that emerge from this study, ranging from physical, mortal fear to a more cosmic kind of horror. This part of the study is directed at establishing these texts as proto-weird fiction where the external fear often turns into a deep-seated disturbance that start affecting the order of things in the immediate and present world with implications far-reaching in the future imagined. The main focal areas would be as following:

i) **A study of social conditioning that examines how 19th-century British society defined and responded to madness.** It explores the external influence of strong ideologies of religion, science, class, and gender on literature to examine how 'non-normative behaviors' – especially emotional intensity, obsession, or intellectual extremity – were intentionally pathologized. Drawing on critical literary views, this research examines how the societal framework shaped perceptions of mental instability and how they assume literary forms. It will also examine the roles of institutions such as asylums and scientific discourse in defining madness in history as a tool of exclusion or control, and establish connection with literature.

ii) **Analysis of archetypal portrayals that defied the normal** in Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights, and Dracula to examine how literary figures who defy social or moral norms are portrayed as mad in these classic Gothic tales. It discusses the obsessive scientist (Victor), the wild romantic (Heathcliff), and the unnatural 'new woman' (Lucy) as archetypes that blur the boundaries between brilliance, passion, and madness. Through close textual reading and theoretical the study highlights how these portrayals challenge Victorian ideals of rationality, gender roles, and moral order, while also preempting the emergence of Weird fiction and its fascination with characters on the psychological edge.

iii) **A close study of the spectrum of madness-induced horror through the 'unknown' aspects of human actions to** investigate how the psyche of these characters form and work. From ambition in Frankenstein, to obsession in

Wuthering Heights, and oppression in Dracula, this study argues that madness is not a separate condition but an extension of the very world that surrounds the characters. Shaped by social pressures, it also contributes to the unsettling atmosphere that later comes to define Weird Fiction.

5. Objectives

This study explores the significance of madness as a defining theme in early proto–Weird Fiction by examining its representation in three influential 19th century texts: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, and Bram Stoker's Dracula. Rather than viewing madness as a purely individual or medical condition, these texts present it as a powerful catalyst that reflects the cultural anxieties of the period and takes shape through various forms of horror. The research is organized around the following objectives:

1. **To examine madness through multiple critical lenses:** psychoanalytical, biomedical, gendered, and socio-cultural – understanding it as a complex and evolving concept shaped by diverse theoretical frameworks rather than a fixed condition.
2. **To study the influence of 19th century social contexts on literary representations of madness,** with particular attention to industrialization, shifting gender roles, colonial anxieties, and scientific advancement, especially in relation to the construction of the "other."
3. **To analyze the representation of a wide spectrum of madness in 19th century proto-Weird Fiction,** focusing on its expression through character psychology, unsettling settings, supernatural motifs, and narrative development shaped by the thoughts and actions of those labelled as "mad."
4. **To establish the 'out-of-the-ordinary' state of mind as a source of fear,** examining forms of mental deviation such as madness, obsession, and delirium as mechanisms that generate terror.

5. **To evaluate the role of madness in shaping Gothic horror and paving the way for Weird Fiction,** demonstrating how the Gothic trope of madness stretches the boundaries of the normal and becomes central to the creation of the horrific. of things are often determining factors behind the creation of the horrific.

6. Methodology to be adopted

This study adopts an interpretivist methodology, focusing on a multidimensional analysis of literary texts. The research emphasizes subjective and socially constructed meanings in order to understand madness beyond clinical diagnosis and place it within the deeper cultural anxieties of the period.

Frankenstein, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Dracula* are examined not only for their narrative and thematic elements, but also as social documents of the 19th century and as literary bridges to 20th century Weird Fiction. These texts reflect fears surrounding scientific progress, moral decline, and other perceived threats, while simultaneously warning against the consequences of unchecked ambition and social lapses.

The research design encourages engagement with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalytic approaches and socio-historical perspectives. Through this combined theoretical and literary analysis, the study establishes madness as a widely used literary trope that allows multiple interpretations and gives rise to various forms of horror. Ultimately, it demonstrates how such representations challenge human perceptions of reality and show how deviation from the norm gives rise to fear, exclusion, and marginalization.

7. Expected outcome of the research

This research explores the madness as a defining factor in determining the generic identity of a group of texts by placing it in the cusp of Gothic and Weird fiction. By taking a sample size of three texts across the breadth of the 19th century, it captures different kinds and aspects of cultural insecurity and anxiety trying to seek cover under the common thread of madness to marginalize the source of threat. While this leads to creation of horror in the readers' mind as the end result, the study sets out to establish these texts as a hybrid genre where they bring together the cultural anxieties of the 19th century and the uncertainty and fear

of human progress in an age of technological advancement in the 20th century under the proposed nomenclature ‘proto-weird fiction’. On the whole, the study establishes madness as a working of the mind that contributes to evoking fear of ‘what happens’ and ‘what could happen’ when it acts in a manner hitherto unknown to the readers.

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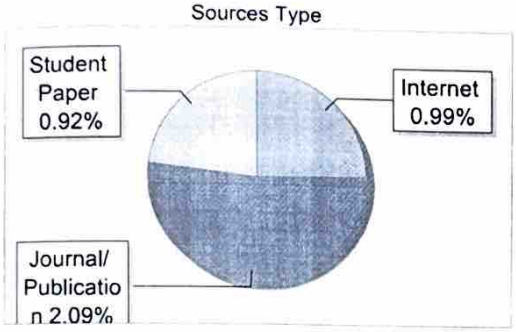

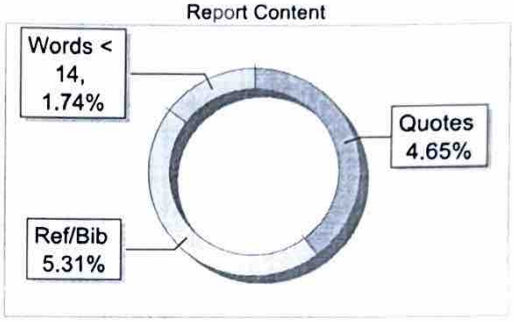

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Annexure-6

MADNESS AT THE HEART OF EARLY WEIRD FICTION: EXPLORING THE ABYSS OF THE MIND THROUGH COMPLEX CHARACTERIZATION IN SEMINAL 19TH CENTURY TEXTS

SHORT SYNOPSIS

by

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Year 2025-26

ABSTRACT

More than being a purely biomedical condition, madness has also been used as a concept in various works across sociocultural, historical and literary concepts for decades – emerging as a tool that, for example, serves as a cover-up for anxieties, a means for exploitation

Swami Vivekananda Library and Research Centre
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Title	Short Synopsis
Paper/Submission ID	5240907
Submitted By	netrapal.library@mru.edu.in
Submission Date	2026-02-06 13:34:38
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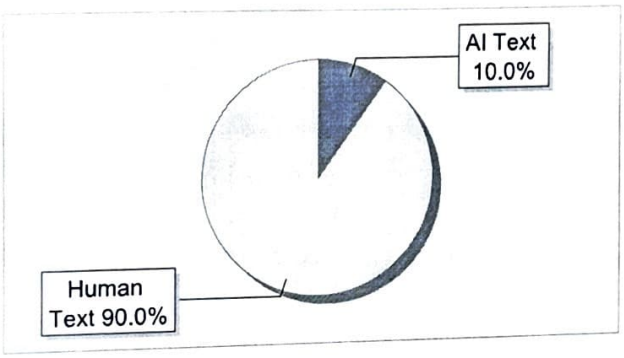

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